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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001478

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E.O. 12958: DECL: AFTER KOREAN REUNIFICATION

TAGS: PREL PARM MARR JA KN KS

SUBJECT: USFK COMMANDER'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON PRESIDENT  
ROH MOO-HYUN - OPCON AND JAPAN DISPUTE

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) In his May 1 introductory call on President Roh Moo-hyun, USFK Commander Gen. B.B. Bell underscored the U.S. commitment to the bilateral alliance and stressed that, in his capacity as CFC Commander, he served the Presidents of both countries equally. Bell stated that the ROK's desire for independent operational control (OPCON) was natural, and the United States was ready to move "as fast as the ROK saw fit." Bell underscored the need to find ways to cement the alliance and not let "small issues" crack the foundation, hinting that the ROK needed to move on the issue of environmental remediation. Roh responded positively to Bell's overall message but did not address environmental remediation or dwell long on the OPCON issue. Rather, he used the meeting to lay out South Korea's familiar concerns about Japan's provocative behavior toward Korea, urging the United States to better appreciate the historical implications of Japan's recent maritime dispute with the ROK on the Dokdo/Takeshima islets and continued visits to the Yasukuni shrine by Japanese leaders and politicians. The Ambassador called for a long-term solution through dialogue, stressing that the United States would not take sides on the issue. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On May 1, accompanied by the Ambassador, USFK Commander Gen. B.B. Bell called on President Roh Moo-hyun. President Roh was accompanied by Defense Minister Yoon Kwang-woong, National Security Secretary Song Min-soon, ROK JCS Chairman Lee Sang Hee, and Deputy NSA Suh Choo-seok.

U.S., ROK NOT TO LET SMALL ISSUES DETRACT FROM ALLIANCE

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¶3. (C) Gen. Bell stated how impressed he was by South Korea's transformation into a full democracy and its economic progress since his earlier tour in the ROK as a young officer. He stressed that, in his capacity as CFC Commander, he served the Presidents of both the United States and the ROK equally. Although he had unilateral responsibility as USFK Commander, he would carefully balance this with his other role as CFC Commander. Bell underscored that he would work hard to address the ROK's military concerns as well as those of the United States. It was important to find ways to cement the alliance and not let "small issues" crack the

foundation, Bell said, alluding implicitly to the need for the ROK to resolve the issue of environmental remediation for the USFK bases returning to the ROKG.

¶4. (C) Roh, without addressing environmental remediation, thanked Bell for his positive assessment. The United States had played an integral part in Korea's development and its role was ongoing. One area of retrogression, Roh noted, was the decline in the authority of the President and the government that accompanied democratization. He agreed with Bell's point that minor differences between the two sides should not be allowed to damage the alliance. Achieving perfect convergence of objectives was impossible, so the United States and the ROK should acknowledge the differences and work together to resolve them. The hardest element, Roh pointed out, was the South Korean media's tendency to exaggerate the differences as symptoms of larger strife between the two allies.

#### SETTLING DIFFERENCES WITH PYONGTAEK RESIDENTS ON RELOCATION

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¶5. (C) In response to Roh's query whether Korea remained a difficult place for U.S. military to serve, Bell said his objective was to make tours in Korea "more normal." To do this, USFK would expand facilities and programs to: (1) help U.S. soldiers get more in touch with the local culture; (2) have family members accompany them; and (3) serve longer tours. Relocating the bases to two hubs would be key to achieving this, Bell said. Noting the local resistance to base relocation in Pyongtaek, Bell hoped the ROKG could find a solution that was acceptable to the citizens of Pyongtaek.

¶6. (C) Roh asked what was the reason for having U.S.

soldiers serve short tours in Korea unaccompanied by family members. Bell responded that the practice was had been established at a time when there was a greater threat perception from the North. With recent changes on the Korean Peninsula, the time was ripe for changing this practice, Bell said, pointing out that U.S. soldiers had served longer tours with their family members in Europe even during the Cold War.

Roh promised the ROK would do all it could to help improve conditions for USFK personnel.

#### OPCON: U.S. TO PROCEED AS FAST AS ROK SAW FIT

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¶7. (C) On the issue of transferring wartime operational control (OPCON) to the ROK, Bell stated that Seoul's desire for independent OPCON was natural and sensible from Washington's perspective. The United States was ready to discuss the path toward that goal. Recalling Secretary Rumsfeld's earlier comments on the issue, Bell said the United States would move "as fast as the ROK saw fit." Roh said he was relieved by the convergence of view on the issue by the two governments. Some anti-American groups in the ROK opposed any cooperation with the United States and continually tried to stir up anti-American sentiments in Pyongtaek to oppose base relocation. Roh thought it was noteworthy that issues like OPCON and increased ROK responsibility in CFC, by strengthening the alliance, would actually stir up anti-American sentiments on the part of those opposed to the alliance. Bell expressed confidence that the two allies could manage such issues.

#### REVISITING FAMILIAR THEMES IN ROK-JAPAN FEUD

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¶8. (C) Roh, conspicuously steering the discussion to Japan, noted that "a number of people" opposed Japan's rearmament, although he himself was not opposed to Japan building up its military enough to be a normal state. Focusing on familiar themes, Roh urged the United States to be more mindful of the historical implications of Japan's recent provocative actions toward Korea. Roh explained, in great detail, three previous attempts by Japan to expand its territory from the 5th century A.D. to the late 16th century, and again in the late

19th century, leading to the occupation of Korea. Japan's expansionist ambitions consequently led to Korea's division and civil war, which was the source of the Korean people's anxiety about Japan's intentions in the region. Even now, 60 years after Korea's liberation, the Japanese continued to evoke concerns of a "fourth manifestation of expansionism" by claiming territorial rights over the Dokdo islets (Liancourt Rocks), having government officials and politicians visit the Yasukuni Shrine, and continuing other provocative actions, Roh said. Even though South Korea had historically maintained strong ties to Japan out of consideration for Seoul's relationship with the United States, Japan's continued display of imprudence would push the Korea to reexamine its position. Bell said all parties, including the United States, wanted to see the problem resolved amicably between Korea and Japan.

AMB: U.S. TO BE EVEN-HANDED ON ROK-JAPAN DIFFERENCES

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¶9. (C) Roh, noting the Ambassador's presence, brought up the recent maritime survey dispute between Korea and Japan, arguing that the ROK had compromised greatly by not changing the names of undersea features in its exclusive economic zone despite Japanese provocation. Japan started the problem by sending out survey ships even though it had representation on the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) subcommittee on names, which gave it ample opportunity to defend its position. Tokyo's reckless behavior could have resulted in devastating consequences. The Ambassador said it was fortunate that skillful diplomacy from both countries had defused the crisis and called for a long-term solution through dialogue. Stressing that both Korea and Japan were close allies of the United States, the Ambassador underscored that the United States would be studiously even-handed on the issue. Roh, stating that he understood the U.S. position, again urged Washington to examine Japan's actions in a broader historical context, implying that the issue was bigger than a minor territorial dispute.

VERSHBOW